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MOTHER-TONGUE EDUCATION IN SPECIFIC REGIONS

ELŻBIETA AWRAMIUK

MOTHER-TONGUE TEACHING IN POLAND: THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

ABSTRACT. The aim of this article is to update the international reader with changes in teaching Polish in Poland in the last 10 years. The first part presents a background and description of the Polish educational system in the midst of radical transformations. The changes under discussion focus on structural reform, which implements a new division into four educational stages, and syllabus reform, which enables teachers of Polish to choose a syllabus. The second part includes a brief description of new tendencies in Polish teaching programs during the period of compulsory education (primary school and junior secondary school).

KEY WORDS: core curriculum, cultural and literary education, language education, Polish as a subject in the school, Polish educational system, syllabuses

INTRODUCTION

The Polish educational system is in the midst of radical transformations. The first stage of reform began in the school year 1999/2000; the end is anticipated in 2004/2005. The general political transformation begun in 1989 became the basis for changes in the Polish educational system.¹ The 1990s ushered in a national debate about the quality of Polish schools as disconnected from real life, non-functional, engaging in encyclopaedia-like teaching, and ignoring the interests of pupils. The advocates of reform claimed that the tempo and the direction of general social changes made learning and using information skills more important than “stable” knowledge. The opponents of radical change argued for the high standard of Polish education, using as evidence Polish pupils’ high achievements in international competitions in school subjects.

Unfortunately, the 1995 OECD report on functional literacy, involving choosing, understanding and assessing information, presented a depressing image of post-war educational results in Poland. The Report concluded

¹ Readers interested in the history of the Polish language and early Polish education can find more information about it in Berlińska (1998).



that 42.6% of Poles were on the lowest level of literacy (Bialecki, 1998: 17), rating Poland poorly among European countries. The research showed that Polish schools had prepared pupils ineffectively for life in a modern technological society in which written communication dominated, and confirmed the necessity for changes in the educational system.

CHANGES TO THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN POLAND

The basic regulations of the Polish educational system were passed in 1991 (Act, 1991). Among other things, this Act described how non-state schools functioned. The growth of these schools, initiated by the Social Educational Society (*Spółeczne Towarzystwo Oświatowe*), became one of the pillars of future reform because they began introducing syllabus and structural changes.

Reforming the Polish educational system proceeded in two directions – structural reform and curriculum reform. The aim of the first was to work out a new set of divisions for general education. The aim of the second was to determine new educational objectives. The Act concerning the reform of the educational system was accepted in 1998 (Act, 1998), and a few months later the rules introducing this reform were passed (Act, 1999). From 1999/2000, children aged 7–13 attended a new 6-year primary school. In the same year, the first grades of a new junior secondary school called *gimnazjum*, came into being.

Structural Reform

Prior to these reforms, pupils began their education in an eight-year primary school, which was divided into two stages. The first stage (years 1 to 3) offered “basic” learning. One teacher taught all subjects in one classroom. The second stage (years 4 to 8) provided “systematic” learning (teaching organised according to academic areas). Each subject was taught by a different teacher and pupils switches classrooms.

After primary school, pupils chose from the following schools:

1. four-year general secondary (*liceum ogólnokształcące*),
2. five-year vocational and technical secondary (*technikum*),
3. four-year vocational secondary (*liceum zawodowe*),
4. three-year vocational (*szkoła zasadnicza*).

Children aged three to six could receive a pre-primary education. This was not compulsory, but the majority of six-year-old children attended either kindergartens or pre-primary classes.

One effect of the reform was the introduction of a new type of school – the *gimnazjum* (junior secondary school). This school constitutes the lower secondary level, formerly part of the eight-year-single-structure school. The *gimnazjum*, targeted for 13–16-year-olds, provides general education in a three-year cycle. Reasons for creating this new type of school varied. Psychologists argued that puberty was such difficult time that separating the older from the younger pupils was a good idea. In the old educational system pupils from 7 to 15 learned in one building. Others claimed that a new type of school would enhance access to education and improve its quality.

After *gimnazjum*, pupils are able to choose between a three-year specialized secondary school (*liceum profilowane*), or a two-year vocational school (*szkoła zasadnicza*).²

Thus, the new educational system is divided into four stages:

- stage I: primary school (*szkoła podstawowa*), grades 1–3,
- stage II: primary school (*szkoła podstawowa*), grades 4–6,
- stage III: junior secondary school (*gimnazjum*), grades 1–3,
- stage IV: post-*gimnazjum* school (*szkoła ponadgimnazjalna*).

Compulsory education covers a six-year primary school and a three-year *gimnazjum*. The post-*gimnazjum* school reform will begin in the 2002/2003 academic year when the first graduates of the *gimnazjum* enter the new schools. Work on the details of post-*gimnazjum* school structures and syllabi are currently underway. The new structure of the Polish educational system will be fully implemented by 2004/2005.

Syllabus Reform

Before these reforms only one syllabus for each educational stage existed (Syllabus for secondary school, 1990a; Syllabus for primary school, 1990b) which every school was obliged to implement. Before 1989, teachers had no input into the curriculum. The 1990s brought positive changes as teachers began participating actively in the change process. They began to understand that they did not have to be only purveyors of imposed ideas but could also contribute to the curriculum content.

Though the first alternative syllabi came into being in the mid-1990s, the roles of teacher autonomy were not clear. Teachers could work with a new syllabus but it had to correspond with the stipulated requirements

² A pupil who has completed a vocational school may then continue his/her education in a two-year supplementary secondary school (*liceum uzupełniające*).

of the Educational Ministry included in the so-called “minimum program” (*minimum programowe*). Because of the degree of detail required,³ and the time allocated, this tended to function more as a “maximum program”. Moreover, the “minimum program” did not include any new educational concepts. Syllabus reform was presented in a document called, *Core curriculum for general education* (1999). This document presents a very general approach providing objectives for each educational stage, the tasks of the school and educational areas such as subjects, blocks of subjects and educational goals. *Core curriculum* aims to guarantee the uniformity of the Polish educational system and, at the same time, offer some autonomy for creators of the detailed syllabi.

Core curriculum defines educational objectives in terms of knowledge, skills and moral education, emphasizing integration of the three in the educational process. The document stresses holism, integration and connections to real life. The general educational objectives are (*Core curriculum for general education*, 1999: 584):

- developing self-learning skills and individual interests;
- developing thinking, initiative and creative problem-solving;
- teaching perception, selection and hierarchical organisation of information, as well as the effective use of information technology;
- developing communicative competence such as speaking, listening, reading, writing;
- developing co-operative skills.

The reformed school aims to prepare pupils to live in a modern world, equipping them not so much with specialist knowledge as the basic skills of adult professional activity.

The general objectives of the primary school aim to develop (*Core curriculum for general education*, 1999: 585) consist of:

- self-expression, reading and writing and the abilities to solve arithmetical problems, to use simple tools and to develop habits of social life;
- cognitive abilities enabling mature understanding of the world;
- conscious cognitive motivation to prepare for undertaking tasks requiring systematic intellectual and physical effort;
- the aesthetic and moral sensitivities of children and their individual creative abilities.

³ For example, realisation of the program-minimum for teaching Polish in secondary school (*Program-minimum*, 1992) covered ca. 90% of the total teaching time spared for this subject.

Stage I in primary school uses “integrated teaching” to facilitate a gentle transition from pre-school to elementary school education. “Integrating” means not dividing the day into subject teaching. Teachers conduct all lessons based on a schedule from the core curriculum; times for work and breaks are adapted to the children’s activities.

Stage II is based on “block teaching.” School subjects are not taught in isolation but are grouped into blocks such as: Natural sciences (e.g., biology, geography); humanities (e.g., Polish, history) and technology. Mathematics, physical education and religion/ethics are excluded from block teaching. In addition, the following “educational paths” such as health, ecology, reading and media and education for society (preparation for family life, the cultural heritage of regions, patriotic and civic education) have been implemented.

The school principal is responsible for including these “paths” in the school curriculum. Teachers of blocks/subjects are responsible for implementing their curricula. “Educational paths” encourage teachers to co-operate with each other and to think in interdisciplinary terms.

Stage III, besides developing individual student interests, aims to introduce students to and arouse interest in (*Core curriculum for general education*, 1999: 601):

- the world of science by means of teaching language, concepts, theories and methodologies characteristic of a given discipline at a level enabling further education;
- the world of culture and arts;
- developing social skills and abilities through creating possibilities for experience in co-operation in peer groups.

The teaching at this stage is arranged into separate subjects (taught by specialist teachers) and is also supplemented by “educational paths” from stage II, as well as Philosophy, European History, Civics, and Polish culture (in the context of Mediterranean civilisation).

Core Curriculum, as a very general document, offers a starting point for the creators of all syllabi. It encourages authors to consider the objectives of general education, the educational aims at a given stage as well as educational goals and contents of the subject for each syllabus.⁴

⁴ More details concerning the Polish educational system are included in *The system of education in Poland* (2000) and on the website of the Ministry of National Education and Sport (www.men.waw.pl/english/index-en.htm).

POLISH AS A SCHOOL SUBJECT

Before these reforms, the subject “Polish” was taught from the first grade of primary school to the last grade of secondary school. Since the reforms, from stage II (grade 4 of primary school) Polish functions as a distinct subject. Stage I focuses on teaching writing, reading, speaking and listening, though these take place within integrated contexts.

Cultural-literary and linguistic education exists within Polish other-tongue education. As well as other subjects, the Minister of National Education determines and specifies the minimum compulsory number of teaching hours of Polish per week. In stage I, for example, there are five lessons per week in grade 1; four in grade 2; and, five in grade 3. In primary school (stage II) there is a weekly lesson pattern over 3 years that totals a 16-lesson unit. For example, there are six weekly lessons in grade 4, five in grade 5, and five in grade 6. In *gimnazjum* (stage III) there is a weekly lesson pattern over 3 years that totals a 14-lesson unit.

Though each lesson lasts 45 minutes, this structure allows for flexibility determined by the school, as long as the total amount of required time is dedicated to Polish education over the three-year period.

Core curriculum emphasizes the role of mother-tongue education as the basis of pupils’ general development throughout their school education. The objectives of the subject Polish within compulsory education (i.e., primary and junior secondary school) are:

- developing writing, reading, listening and speaking in different communicative situations (private and public) important to living in a democratic and civil state;
- developing interest in Polish language as an element of cultural heritage;
- identifying the interests, capability and needs of pupils to set appropriate objectives and content;
- motivating students to read and develop the skills of understanding literary and other cultural texts;
- teaching how to participate in culture, particularly in its symbolic and axiological dimensions.

Authors of syllabi are obliged to respect the general educational objectives, contents and outcomes included in the *Core curriculum* such as: basic notions and terms; general reading proposals; and achievements described in five macro-skills, speaking, listening, reading, writing and “cultural” texts. The contents of *Core curriculum* differ from those written down in older curricula. Effectively, this means more focus on contemporary world issues (e.g., iconic media, advertising, effective negotiating, inter-semiotic

translation); effective communication (e.g., recognition of speaker's and writer's intentions, expressing oneself in different generic forms, using language in a widening range of communicative situations); and ethical dimensions of communication (e.g., sincerity, lying, manipulation, verbal aggression).

There is an important stylistic difference between *Core curriculum* and older curricula. *Core curriculum* draws readers' attention to the pedagogical process and the pupil, who is no longer simply the object of a didactic process. Although *Core curriculum* provides direction for change, it does not show how to achieve these new objectives. Many argue that detailed pedagogical concepts ought to be included in the teaching programs and curricula (Chrzastowska, 1996).

NEW TENDENCIES IN TEACHING PROGRAMS

Currently, teachers of Polish language have three options. They can choose the programs authorised by the Minister of Education, modify the program approved by the Minister to their pupils' needs, or create their own program. Most teachers choose the first option. They choose textbooks related to specific programs from the list of those approved by the Minister.⁵

There are many different programs for teaching the mother-tongue in primary school and junior secondary school authorized by the Minister of Education. They outline various ways of implementing educational tasks defined in the core curriculum. Some are very traditional (though not necessarily conservative), while others are more innovative. The most interesting of these proposed changes concern the objectives of language education, the contents of literary and cultural education and current teaching methods.

Communicative Model of Language Education

In Poland, language education was associated with teaching grammar or – more generally – knowledge *about* language. Before the reforms, language issues were treated theoretically, without links to other aspects of Polish language education, such as literary and cultural education, or even writing. Grammar often existed as a “sub-subject.” In the 1990s,

⁵ A sign of this freedom is the number of textbooks for some subjects – for example in December 2001, there were 62 approved textbooks and supplementary books for teaching Polish in a *gimnazjum* (in comparison with a few textbooks for VII–VIII classes in the pre-reform eight-year primary school).

the role of grammar in school teaching was debated and resulted in three recommendations:

- remove grammar from the contents of teaching programs or limit it considerably;
- update teaching content, i.e., to introduce new methodologies in studying language;
- combine the knowledge of language with pragmatic education, which meant to limit “knowledge” in favour of language “skills.”

The third suggestion found the most support. The argument was between teaching knowledge *about* language (understood as a system) and language skills (understood as individual processes of speech). Shifting the emphasis from a language system or grammar to the pragmatics of speech stemmed from new educational-theoretical approaches published in various scientific centres in Poland (Pawłowska, 1993; Bakula, 1997). A number of authors advocated language education based on studies in psychology, psycholinguistics, socio-linguistics, text linguistics and cognitive linguistics.

The *Core curriculum* in language education aims to develop communicative competence,⁶ understood as teaching writing, reading, listening and speaking as well as the study of different “culture texts.” Describing the language system should serve to support linguistic performance. Contact with real language and using language should be more important than getting to know the rules of grammar.

As stated previously, the authors of Polish teaching programs include the objectives of the *Core curriculum*. In the introductions to their programs, they claim developing communicative competence as a primary goal. Unfortunately, not every program’s contents reflect the stated aims in the Introduction. For example, a traditional course of grammar is seldom integrated with other aspects of Polish education. Specific, related teaching methods are often missing. For example, formal exercises with instructions such as *underline, show, name, classify*, are still common.

The program *I like it!* (Jędrychowska, Kłakówna, Mrazek & Steczko, 1999a; Jędrychowska, Kłakówna, Mrazek & Potaś, 1999b) is an example of a new trend in both methodology and choice of content in language education. The first version used in schools in 1995, four years before the reforms were introduced, was meant for the eight-year primary school. With educational reforms, the program was adapted to the six-year primary

⁶ The term “communicative competence” is new in *Core curriculum for general education* (it did not occur in old syllabuses), but it does not mean the pragmatic skills were not being taught.

school and *gimnazjum*. The revised version of this program for the secondary school was published this year.

The program *I like it!* is based on speech-act theory. Language improvement is its main aim. Education *about* language, as well as literary and cultural education are secondary. Speech acts created with specific speaker intentions to communicate are the centre of interest during lessons. Grammar is treated as a tool supporting the pragmatics of speech-acts. Education about chosen linguistic phenomena (phonetic, inflectional, lexical, word-formation, and syntactic) takes place while using language – the act of speech bringing about a certain situation. The innovative character of this program is included as the practical dimension of a communicative model. The main aim of language education – developing communicative competence in different communicative situations – is realised by initiating communicative situations during lessons and thus learning language while using it.

Changes in Cultural-Literary Education

Previous syllabi included compulsory reading lists and related topics to cover in each course: Literary education focused on teaching the history of literature or knowledge about literature. The debates of the 1990s over the forms of literary education were based on research concerning the study of literature in schools (Marzec, 1981; Uryga, 1982; Baluch, 1984) and by new areas of Polish teaching (Marzec & Rzęsikowski, 1994; Jędrychowska, 1994; Kaczyńska, 1995). Suggestions flowing from these new ideas were:

- teach the reading of texts, not to teach about texts;
- teach the reading of non-“literary” (“culture”) texts such as television, film, comic strip, poster, etc. as well a traditional literature;
- connect with high culture, but also use mass culture in education;
- update reading-list titles to create motivation for reading;
- consider pupils’ interests and needs.

These ideas are included in the *Core curriculum*. Cultural-literary education aims to identify reader’s interests, spark motivation and develop awareness of traditional culture.

As with language education, stated objectives of every Polish teaching program are not often reflected in the suggested set books or in the methods of working with texts. For example, texts from the 19th century taught to 10-year-old children have exercises where they are asked to *name the figures of rhetoric*.

The *I like it!* program prefers “culture” texts (including non-verbal texts) for children or young readers (Jędrychowska et al., 1999a: 12, 1999b: 14–15). Set books are chosen from a large list of titles suggested for each grade. Language is functional. The concepts are taught while working with a particular text. The aim of reading is not solely knowledge about literature, but rather knowledge about the world, the articulation of reflection, and transformation of intuition into conscious cognition.

Ways to Achieve the New Educational Objectives

Realization of the new objectives for teaching Polish is only possible with changes to teaching methods. In the old “presentation teaching” (Kawka, 1999: 30, 33–34), the teacher dominated pupils and classroom talk.

Shifting the emphasis from knowledge to skills led to changes in dominant teaching methods. The new programs suggest both new content and new ways of achieving objectives. Books for teachers working with specific programs contain detailed methodological ideas. For example, the methods book for the program *I like it!* (Dyduch, Jędrychowska, Kłakówna, Mrazek & Steczko, 1994) sets out to address the issues of how to develop pupil’s language; treat non-verbal texts from textbooks and teach the study of literary texts. Changes in teaching methods increase the degree of pupil activity and engagement, expression of feelings and needs, language and intellectual development.

CONCLUSION

Significant changes in teaching Polish in Poland over the last ten years have affected many aspects of Polish schools, primarily in the freedom of teachers and pupils to actively participate in language experiences. For teachers, the reforms encourage opportunities to choose a program or create one. The reforms/programs consider pupil needs and capacities. Mother tongue is taught holistically rather than in isolated “pieces” such as grammar exercises or facts about literature.

Public examinations will assess the effect of these changes. In the reformed educational system, new principles of pupil assessment have been adopted. At the end of all school levels (primary, the *gimnazjum* and the secondary school) external, standardised tests or examinations will be held. The process of change is still proceeding, but it seems new educational objectives in mother tongue teaching in Poland aim to prepare pupils to live in a multi-lingual and multi-cultural world.

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